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CIA zeros in on Mexico corruption

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Wiretaps called confirmation of charges of dishonesty in police, elected officials

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The CIA has been conducting a wiretap operation in Mexico that has corroborated allegations of corruption among law enforcement and political officials in that country, *The San Diego Union* has learned.

The CIA's cooperation in drug investigations is a recent departure from its traditional role of intelligence-gathering, sources say, and resulted from pressures generated by the kidnap-torture slaying of Drug Enforcement Administration agent Enrique Camarena Salazar last year in Guadalajara.

Policy differences recently surfaced between the CIA, which began passing information relating to drug-related corruption to the DEA, and Department of Justice lawyers, who are planning future prosecutions.

The CIA passed along the incriminating conversations for "intelligence purposes only," said one source, while the Justice Department wants to use the wiretapped conversations as evidence in any court trials that arise from the current investigations.

The wiretap operation was done without the knowledge of the Mexican government, the sources said, because of fear that the operation would be endangered.

U.S. Attorney Peter K. Nunez was

called to Washington, D.C. last week to discuss the case, the sources said. Nunez would not comment on his trip, but other sources said the spy agency is no longer providing information to the DEA.

The extent of the wiretap operation could not be confirmed. Although one source in the intelligence community said it involved taps on the telephones of several high government officials, others said the information passed to the DEA came from a tap on the Mexico City telephone of a U.S. citizen in contact with numerous police officials, state officials and drug traffickers.

"If the CIA is doing more, they're not telling DEA," said a Justice Department official who would not speak for attribution.

A spokesman for the CIA yesterday had no comment.

The wiretap of the American citizen raises a legal question.

For wiretap evidence gathered in a foreign jurisdiction to be used in a U.S. court, a Justice Department source said, the wiretap generally must be in accordance with that country's laws. However, the source added, in the case of Mexico — where vast numbers of government officials are believed to be in league with drug traffickers — to apply for a legal wiretap might be tantamount to alerting the suspects.

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The source said there was no dispute between the CIA and Justice Department, but merely discussion about how far the CIA would be willing to go publicly, including possible disclosure of methods of operations, to authenticate the wiretaps. The Justice Department needs to know that information before any prosecution is undertaken, the source said.

Another source said the wiretapped conversations gathered in Mexico are notable for their candor.

"There's no pretense, no subtlety," said the source. "They just say, 'Bring 20 kilos of s--- (heroin) here by tomorrow or I'll have your b--- cut off. No cute talk like in the U.S., where people might say, 'How many oranges do you want?'"

The cooperation of the CIA in a drug investigation has been a rarity until recently.

Many DEA field agents and supervisors who have worked in foreign countries relate stories about past cases where a drug trafficker has been targeted, only to have the CIA intervene and discourage the investigation on grounds that the trafficker was working for the spy agency.

That was possible because law enforcement agencies working in a foreign country must report the names of their foreign informants to the CIA station chief at the country's U.S. embassy.

This massive investigative effort was undertaken after the kidnapping and torture-slaying of DEA agent Camarena, who was seized on a Guadalupe street on Feb. 7, 1985.

"Operation Leyenda" is the name of the year-and-a-half investigation into the Camarena murder. "Leyenda" is Spanish slang for "lawman," a nickname by which the gung-ho Camarena was known to his colleagues. The investigation included presenting evidence before a federal grand jury in Washington, D.C., last year. The probe recently shifted to a federal grand jury in San Diego and is headed by two special prosecutors from Department of Justice headquarters.

Sources say U.S. investigators in Mexico reached and otherwise developed so many contacts that they did not keep the CIA fully informed of their activities.

After high-level discussions, the sources say, the DEA agreed to make the CIA aware of their informants and the spy agency, in turn, agreed to provide to the DEA information it developed pertaining to the Camarena killing or to drug-related corruption in Mexico.

The interagency cooperation comes nearly five years after President Reagan signed Executive Order 12333 on Dec. 4, 1981, authorizing the CIA to "collect, produce and disseminate intelligence on foreign aspects of narcotics production and trafficking."

But the order includes clear limitations on what the CIA can do when its surveillance involves a U.S. citizen in a foreign country.

It requires the CIA to use "the least intrusive collection techniques feasible" and expressly prohibits the use of such techniques as "electronic surveillance, unconsented physical search or monitoring devices unless they are ... approved by the attorney general."

The order states that such approval is not to be granted "unless the attorney general has determined in each case that there is probable cause to believe the (surveillance) technique is directed against a foreign power or an agent of a foreign power."

A Justice Department spokesman yesterday refused comment on this.

CIA spokesman George Lauder yesterday said the agency has a standing policy against discussing its operations and, therefore, would not comment publicly on the wiretap allegations.

But a senior intelligence official said the U.S. intelligence community, including the CIA, collects information on narcotics and passes it on to other government branches, including the DEA.

The official, who spoke on the condition that he not be identified, said: "Narcotics in Mexico is not (the CIA's) cupcake. Other organs of the United States government are deeply enmeshed in it."

The State Department and DEA lead the U.S. anti-drug effort in Mexico, including the gathering of narcotics-related intelligence, the official said, adding that the CIA's role is to provide narcotics information that other agencies cannot get.

The official declined to say whether that includes information from wiretaps, electronic intercepts or other forms of surveillance.

An administration official familiar with U.S. intelligence activities in Mexico said yesterday, "You bet ... (the CIA) collects information on narcotics (there and in other nations). It's one of the agency's priorities." The administration official also declined to be identified.

White House spokesman Don Mathis said he is absolutely certain there is an exchange of drug-related information between the State Department, the National Security Council and the DEA. But he had no comment on any CIA role.

DEA Administrator John Lawn was in Palermo, Sicily, yesterday and could not be reached for comment. DEA Public Affairs spokesman William Algen said the agency would make no comment.

Contributing to this story were Copley News Service Washington correspondents Benjamin Shore and Marcus Stern.

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